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*Jack Anderson*

# Private Aid to the *Contras*

The anti-Sandinista guerrillas in Nicaragua appear to be getting along just fine without official CIA aid, which was cut off by Congress last year. The "privatization" of the Reagan administration's covert war against the revolutionary government in Managua has apparently succeeded.

The cutoff of CIA funding last June forced the guerrilla leaders to look elsewhere for financial support. Several private groups stepped into the breach with money and supplies.

My reporter Jon Lee Anderson has witnessed the flow of private aid to the rebels firsthand. He reports that the private groups have almost filled the void left by the CIA cutoff.

At the same time, however, some U.S.-government aid is still reaching the *contras* in their front-line staging areas in Honduras. Only now it's called "humanitarian assistance."

Congress voted \$7.5 million in humanitarian assistance for "Nicaraguan refugees in Honduras," specifically targeting those in the remote Mosquitia region near the Nicaraguan border. According to U.S. Embassy officials and international relief personnel in Honduras, only about 3,000 refugees are living there. The

majority of refugees—some 17,000 Miskito Indians—live in U.N. refugee camps.

But there are also hundreds of Indian Misura rebels in the Mosquitia area who have been without CIA support since last summer. Technically, of course, they are also refugees—gun-toting refugees.

The humanitarian-aid legislation was cosponsored by Sen. Jeremiah Denton (R-Ala.), and Rep. Bob Livingston (R-La.). One of Livingston's constituents is Louisiana state legislator Lopus "Woody" Jenkins, founder and driving force behind the Friends of the Americas Foundation. He set up the refugee relief agency, he said, "to aid the victims of communist aggression." The group is now one of the principal sources of private assistance to the Nicaraguan *contras* and their exiled families in Honduras.

"It's safe to say that, in the minds of some people advocating the aid, the idea of helping those hurt by the CIA cutoff was a factor," said a Western diplomat in Tegucigalpa. But he also discounted the possibility that refugee aid is actually going to the *contras*, saying: "Aiding refugees is not the same as funding the *contras*, and this program is to help refugees."

Refugee relief people on the scene have expressed misgivings about the new U.S. assistance; they are concerned that it is being "used politically." The Agency for International Development has been in charge of the new program, which started last November.

Meanwhile, the private aid continues to flow to the *contras*. My associate accompanied a plane-load of supplies taken by Jenkins to the remote Mosquitia region.

It became clear that the Friends of the Americas contingent, which included an assistant to Denton, was involved with more than simple refugee relief. Uniformed Misura guerrillas with rifles slung on their backs stood guard at the airstrip while the DC-3's cargo was unloaded. Rebel jeeps shuttled the supplies to refugee camps located in the vicinity of the Misura military camps.

Jenkins himself said he views his relief effort as "a strategic lever to help the forces of democracy in the region." He made no secret of his support for the anti-Sandinista rebels. Misura guerrilla leader Steadman Fagoth was equally open in his praise for Jenkins' assistance. The foundation's provision of food, medicine and

clothing, he said, had allowed his army to "concentrate on the war" against the Sandinistas.

Meanwhile, some of the taxpayer-appropriated \$7.5 million has been earmarked for purposes other than food and immediate necessities. According to a U.S. Embassy official, \$1.5 million has been committed to developing "infrastructure" in the refugee area near the Nicaraguan border. This, he said, consists primarily of construction of a decent bridge over a river that separates several of the refugee and guerrilla camps. This busy transit point, used by both rebels and refugees, is now served by a frontier-style raft operated by ropes and pulleys.

Another \$1 million, the embassy official said, is being spent on a "health sweep" of the region and for construction of a clinic, which will also benefit Hondurans in the area.

As for the remaining development funds, which must be allocated by next Sept. 30, AID apparently hasn't quite figured out what to do with it all. The reason may be, as one observer suggested, that the amount available is an extraordinary sum to be absorbed by the barren, underpopulated region Congress set out to help.

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